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Secretary of State Rice is beginning a new push for Middle East peace. After an unannounced stopover in Baghdad today, she heads to Jerusalem for trilateral meeting with the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israel's Prime Minister Olmert on Monday.

But Mr. Abbas's decision to try to form a unity government with Hamas, which the United States considers a terrorist organization, may complicate the diplomacy. NPR's Michele Kelemen reports.

MICHELE KELEMEN: Secretary Rice has been trying to draw clear distinctions in the Middle East between moderates like Mahmoud Abbas and extremists, like Hamas, which has been running the Palestinian government. Her meeting on Monday is meant to Abbas, as is her plan to spend \$86 million to help train forces loyal to him. The announcement of a unity government, she says, made this more complicated.

Ms. CONDOLEEZZA RICE (U.S. Secretary of State): I don't know what will ultimately becomes of the Palestinian unity government. I do know that if Hamas has strong forces and Mahmoud Abbas does not, that's not good for the United States, that's not good for the Palestinians and it's most certainly not good for Israel.

KELEMEN: Rice was speaking yesterday to a House subcommittee chaired by New York Democrat Nita Lowey, who put a hold on the aid package even before Abbas's Fatah movement and Hamas agreed to form a unity government. Illinois Republican, Mark Steven Kirk also raised his doubts.

Representative MARK STEVEN KIRK (Republican, Illinois): We're in if Fatah is combating Hamas, which is designated as a terrorist organization. But we're out if he's working with them. If Abbas is working with those guys, then why should he take us for an \$86 million ride?

KELEMEN: Rice could only say that the Palestinians did what they did to stop deadly clashes. She said she can't criticize that. Palestinians have been hoping to get out from under an international aid blockade, but Rice has been insisting that Hamas meets certain principles first - recognize Israel and renounce terrorism. Robert Malley of the International Crisis Group has always questioned this, saying Palestinians should be tested on action, not rhetoric.

Mr. ROBERT MALLEY (International Crisis Group): And what I always thought should matter most is how the government actually performs in terms of the ceasefire. Does it - is it prepared to really adhere to and implement and impose a mutual, reciprocal ceasefire with Israel, a comprehensive ceasefire? And in terms of the negotiating room it gives to President Abbas, who in any event is the one, as head of the PLO, who is supposed to negotiate with Israel, not the government.

KELEMEN: Malley is hoping the European, Russian and U.N. officials who meet with Rice next week will encourage her to deal with the unity government. As she begins her trip, there are troubles on the Israeli side as well. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is so low in the polls that few analysts expect he can deliver much in the trilateral meeting on Monday. Martin Indyk of the Brookings Institution understands why the State Department is lowering expectations. He says it will take many months for Secretary Rice to try to get past all these weaknesses.

Mr. MARTIN INDYK (Brookings Institution): It's going to take six months of her weathering the kind of headlines that you in the press are inevitably going to write about, the fact that she hasn't produced anything, that she's failed again. And there are others in the administration that will want to take advantage of that and power-lyze her. That's power-lyze rather paralyze, but it means the same thing.

KELEMEN: Former Secretary of State Colin Powell's chief of staff once said that every time Powell went out on a limb in the Middle East, someone back in Washington would cut the branch. Secretary Rice now says she's trying to get the Israelis and Palestinians talking about issues they haven't dealt with for six years, the contours of a two-state solution. Michele Kelemen, NPR News, Washington.